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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 003126

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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS: THE BATTLE FOR ZARQA

REF: A. AMMAN 1936

- [¶B.](#) AMMAN 2668
- [¶C.](#) AMMAN 251
- [¶D.](#) AMMAN 2301
- [¶E.](#) 06 AMMAN 5945
- [¶F.](#) AMMAN 1410
- [¶G.](#) AMMAN 528
- [¶H.](#) AMMAN 1031
- [¶I.](#) AMMAN 2255

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Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

Summary

[¶1.](#) (SBU) Election fever is building in Zarqa, the third largest city in Jordan and hometown of the infamous former leader of Al Qa'ida-in-Iraq Abu Musab al Zarqawi. Zarqa is Jordan's industrial heartland, a bedroom community for many workers in Amman, and houses significant military facilities.

It suffers from high concentrations of poverty and unemployment, and citizens complain about health problems caused by pollution. A large portion of its population is of Palestinian origin.

[¶2.](#) (SBU) For all these reasons, Zarqa is known as a hotbed of Islamist activity and is considered home turf for the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is perceived by the populace as a strong advocate for social justice and opponent of normalization with Israel. IAF candidates won elections for mayor in 1995 and 1999. In 2003, mayors were appointed by the GOJ, but the IAF won four of the eight available elected council seats that year (another eight council seats were also appointed by the GOJ).

[¶3.](#) (SBU) Conventional wisdom would give the IAF an easy win in Zarqa. However, in two visits at the end of July, polooff heard numerous criticisms of the Front. Many residents of Zarqa appear keen to erase their city's unfortunate identification with Jordan's most famous terrorist. Nationalist candidates seek to upset the IAF on their home turf, and some political observers believe they may be able to. END SUMMARY.

IAF Facing Internal and External Challenges

[¶4.](#) (SBU) Conventional wisdom would give the IAF the upper hand on its home turf in Zarqa; they have won elections here twice before, and Zarqa is one of only five municipalities where the IAF chose to compete for mayor this time around. However, IAF candidate Saud Al Mahfoudh is considered extreme even within the Front. The internal IAF nominating process

was reportedly cantankerous (ref A), and some GoJ officials have speculated that Mahfoudh's politics will turn off Zarqa voters. In the context of Hamas' mid-June takeover in Gaza, several observers predicted that the IAF will lose votes among Jordanians of Palestinian origin who sympathize with the Palestinian Authority (the majority, per our contacts). This perspective was supported by two Salafi Imams with whom poloff met.

The Political Machinery

¶15. (SBU) During poloff's visits on July 15 and 20, a plethora of election banners and signs could be seen all over Zarqa, despite the fact that campaigning is officially prohibited until a week before the election. Nearly every lamppost on the main streets supported large portraits of the three top mayoral candidates (two nationalists and one from the IAF) and several aspiring council members. Compared to other cities in Jordan, the quality and quantity of campaign material was dramatic.

¶16. (SBU) Poloff toured the campaign headquarters of Mohammad Al Ma'aiteh, a candidate for council member in Zarqa's first district, and Mohammad Musa Al Ghweiri, a nationalist candidate seeking to upset the IAF in the mayoral contest. Ma'aiteh introduced a dedicated and active staff of mostly volunteers. In front of the building a makeshift salon was set up in the street to receive guests and allow supporters to discuss "their" candidate. Staff paraded voter registration books, and explained how Ma'aiteh's supporters collected identity documents from voters (their friends, family and others) who would support their candidate. Said supporter registers the names on his list with the elections authority, and then becomes responsible for following up with those voters on election day in a coordinated get-out-the-vote campaign. The campaign and volunteers provide buses and cars to deliver voters to and from the

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polls, while a team of operators works the phones back at headquarters.

¶17. (SBU) Al Ghweiri's campaign headquarters was more impressive still, buzzing with activity and evidently well financed by local businessmen, who strongly support him over the IAF candidate. Poloff met with Al Ghweiri, his campaign manager and a dozen staffers who were universally motivated and expecting victory. Abu Ali, an elderly but spry Bedouin, beamed as his list of registered names was brought out and Al Ghweiri lauded him as one of his best volunteers. Abu Ali didn't hesitate to stump for his candidate, extolling his virtues for poloff's benefit and continuing the speech with passers-by when the meeting closed.

Nationalists Confident of Victory over the IAF

¶18. (C) These anti-IAF candidates for the council and for mayor were brimming with optimism. They pointed to strong popular reaction against Hamas' actions in Gaza (ref B) and predicted it would be a serious liability for the IAF, seen as closely associated with Hamas. This is the "beginning of the end for the IAF," they told poloff, and the IAF would not provide solutions or serve the needs of the people. "The political consciousness has changed," they said; people are concerned about events in Gaza, Iraq and Lebanon and believe the IAF will bring such misery to Jordan. Abu Ali, the Bedouin force-multiplier, grabbed poloff's hand and counted off Al Ghweiri's priorities finger-by-finger: 1) the citizens, 2) the nation, 3) the King, and 4) patriotism.

¶19. (C) 100,000 voters are registered in Zarqa. Al Ghweiri campaign staff estimated 25-30,000 votes are needed to win the mayoralty, but the IAF could only muster 20,000. Pro-government MP Mohammad Arsalan told poloff that the IAF

had registered only 18,000 voters in Zarqa (observers predict 60-65 per cent turn out) and the other 80,000 were up for grabs. He predicted Al Ghweiri could win and secure a majority in the council. He said he did not support Al Ghweiri politically, but tactically. Arsalan criticized Al Ghweiri's lack of a political program, and admitted he was "not necessarily free of corruption...but an IAF loss in Zarqa would be a powerful symbolic victory for the GOJ."

A Zarqa Political Rally

¶10. (SBU) Poloff attended a large political rally Al Ghweiri held on July 20. Al Ghweiri and several candidates for the council delivered passionate nationalist speeches punctuated by chants of honor for King Abdullah. An organized band of supporters guided male and female attendees to their separated seats, traditional Bedouin coffee was served, and students from a local school for the deaf distributed juice and water. Small children handed out cards and brochures for council candidates and guests were treated to a deafening fireworks display. The crowd - mostly dressed in western clothes, with perhaps ten per cent in traditional Arab garb - was mellow but attentive. The next day Al Ghweiri's campaign manager called poloff to report his campaign's satisfaction with the turnout (although his estimate of 10,000 was twice poloff's own estimate based on talking to chair vendors) and boasted it may have been the biggest political rally ever in Jordan. He claimed that the IAF had only gathered 400-500 supporters for its own rally that same evening.

A Liberal Alternative?

¶11. (U) Another alternative candidate, Ali Al Khalayleh, is employing a different strategy, one focused on his message of improving public services. Shunning the kind of popular rally perfected by his opponent, Khalayleh has instead reached out to community leaders. On July 20, while Ghweiri was surrounded by thousands of potential supporters, Khalayleh talked about leaking sewage and road conditions in a section of town often overlooked by local government. This strategy may not be enough to win the mayoralty, but it could propel Besma Al Khulaifat, a female candidate who made an alliance with Khalayleh and shares his service-oriented outlook, onto the council. Khulaifat reportedly agreed to bring 600 family votes to Khalayleh in exchange for his support of her campaign in Zarqa's fifth district. The Khalayleh family is well represented there and may add as many as 500 votes, more than some observers estimate she will need to win under the new quota for women (septel).

Comment: Bare-knuckle politics and spin, spin, spin

¶12. (C) The nationalist candidates in Zarqa appear up for

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the challenge of confronting the IAF, and no doubt the GOJ, led by the General Intelligence Directorate, is doing what it can to facilitate this effort (ref C). Efforts at prediction would be fruitless, and Zarqa is well-known for its allegiance to the IAF, but an unappealing candidate and public debate over the Front's support for Hamas appear to have blown the race open unexpectedly. Yet the IAF is a force to be reckoned with, its leadership knows a loss in Zarqa would be politically devastating, and the non-Islamist vote will be split among competing candidates. END COMMENT.

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Hale